

Classified Ads
PHONE
Duxbury 225-W

Duxbury Clipper

Volume I, No. 23

DUXBURY, MASS., THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1950

Gurnet Light Has Been Operating Since 1769

By FISHER AMES

The eighth light to be operated by the colonies was our own Gurnet Light, in 1769. No toll seems to have been levied on shipping for its maintenance. The first warning sentinel of our coast was Boston Light, built on Great Brewster Island in 1716. This was an expensive and important beacon. For its support the following Act was passed, the island then belonging to King George I: "All Masters shall pay to the Receiver of Imports one Penny per Ton Inwards, and another Penny Outwards, except Coasters, who are to pay Two Shillings each, at their clearance Out, and all Fishing Vessels, Wood Sloops, etc., Five Shillings each by the Year."

Lightning Often Struck Tower

Perhaps that was the reason why lightning seemed to mark the tower for its own, descending upon it too often for the comfort of its inmates who tried to have insulating conductors installed. That radical idea was opposed by several Godly citizens who thought it "vanity and irreligious" for the arm of the flesh to presume to avert the stroke of Heaven. The British helped the lighting out splendidly by blowing up the light in 1775. It was not only the first Lighthouse in America; it also had the first fog signal, not the loud-roaring horn universally adopted later, but a veteran of the war, a cannon, which still stands at its post in honorable retirement.

Today, there are more than 2300 light bearing towers and beacons standing guard along our coasts and inland waterways. There were only ten in operation when the colonies were organized into one united and independent nation in 1776. That next year Massachusetts relinquished the ownership and all State control of its lights and the Gurnet, together with the others, passed into the possession of the U. S. Government. At the time the keeper of the Gurnet Light was a woman, a Mrs. Thomas.

Lighthouse keepers were almost always appointed in pairs to insure the presence of at least one person capable of duty. Mrs. Thomas of the Gurnet may have been a widow, or there might have been a self-effacing husband in the background. At any rate no mention is made of a partner for the lady, or whether she retained her job after the light became U. S. property. Her salary was probably about \$200 a year if as much as that. It wasn't till 1819 that Congress raised the salaries of lighthouse keepers to \$450, and 33 years later it ordered that: "Women and servants must not be employed in the management of lights except by special authority of the Department." By that time it is safe to say that Mrs. Thomas didn't care what Congress did about lighthouses.

The department referred to was a new branch. Until 1852 all lighthouses were under the control of the Fifth Auditor of the Treasury who was more than busy over other matters. In consequence the service was neglected, complaints began to pour in and finally the discontent became so vocal that Congress had to listen. It passed an Act for the formation of a Lighthouse Board, with the Secretary of the Treasury as ex-officio president, with full powers over the erection, repair and maintenance of all lighthouses, light-ships, beacons and buoys. That Board raised our light service, which was once the

worst in the world, to a top position among the best.

Curious Situations

The Board, however, couldn't always be sure of the human element. Curious situations sometimes arose at these sentinel stations due to their isolation and the too close association of small groups of individuals arbitrarily thrown together for long periods. Married couples grew so bored with each other they wanted to resign and go back to the delightful chatter of town society. The Board records an instance where two keepers were living like complete strangers because of a radical difference of opinion concerning the humble potatoes. One couldn't consider them as food unless the were well fried, the other wouldn't even look at them if they were not thoroughly mashed. Culinary tastes are not easy to reconcile, no compromise was possible here and the matter had to be officially adjudicated by the Board.

At Cape Hinchinbrook light two of the three keepers (the families being permitted here) fell into such a bitter row over a lost ring that for six months not a word passed between them. By that time the third keeper thought it up to him to take a hand. He not only failed to stop the quarrel, like most would-be peace makers, but lost his temper and became a third figure in the angry silence pact. Each man did his duties as if he were alone at the light, each cooked and ate his own meals in solitary and gloomy state.

Destroyed By Fire

Gurnet Light was destroyed by fire in 1801 and rebuilt in 1803. An official report says of it: "They (the two white towers) require to be double to distinguish them from the single light of Barnstable." In a later amendment the report added: "It is but a few years since a vessel was lost to the northward of them, the captain protesting that but one tower was lighted, by which he was deceived."

The captain was wrong the report maintained. Both towers were lighted but owing to the position of the vessel one light concealed the other and so but one was visible to the unfortunate captain. It was admitted officially that the Gurnet Light was obscured from 328 degrees to 351 degrees.

For more than a century all the waters and shores of Plymouth County excepting the towns of Wareham and Rochester were included in Customs District VI, created in 1789 by an Act of the First Congress. Plymouth, as the main port of entry, carried on all the activities pertaining to the office. Other towns such as Duxbury, Scituate and Kingston were

MATERIAL FOR UN FLAG

Material for the UN flag project will be on sale at Browne's Department Store.

A nation-wide reorganization of the service in 1913 abolished District VI which had declined very much in importance and Plymouth with its smaller sub-district passed under the jurisdiction of the Collector of Customs, District VI of Boston. The change was one of convenience to suit new conditions. Both Customs and the lighthouse departments were now brought up-to-date and ready to give effective service.

Record of Wrecks

The life-saving service had long been neglected. Not until 1872 was any official record kept of the wrecks along the Atlantic coast and there had been many. The first that we know anything about was that of the little Sparrowhawk in 1625 near the heel of Cape Cod. Entombed in the sands for more than 200 years the tides that had buried it there dug it up again in 1863. Her fate belonged to history. Of many of the other wrecks the only records were those of brief and often inaccurate hearsay.

The first life-saving station was established at Cohasset about 1807, a private venture of the Massachusetts Humane Society. There were no paid or even regular crews, reliance in times of need being placed entirely on volunteers. With the best intentions this type of service was of small value, but for many years there was nothing else.

Terrible Year

The year of 1853 stands foremost in the old annals of New England for severity of weather and terrible disasters at sea. Frightful storms swept the coast. Aid to the shipwrecked was impossible in most cases under the volunteer system. The unprecedented series of catastrophes got under the skin of Congress at last, but that body was as usual slow to move. It was not until the following year when the ship Powhatan, bound for New York from Havre, ran aground on Long Beach and virtually all of her 311 immigrant passengers were lost that any real legislative action was taken.

Congress at once passed a bill to provide for a regularly paid coast guard. (Continued on Page Eight)

guard. It was a first step and an important one but it was only a beginning. The system lacked proper rules and discipline. There were other weaknesses throughout. In fact it began to be seen that it wasn't a system at all. It wasn't, as the saying is, really pulling its weight in the boat. There were all evidences of graft as well as lack of coordination, but 20 years went by before Congress again tackled the problem. In 1874 the Coast Guard Service was investigated, thoroughly overhauled and improved and it has been further tightened and made more efficient ever since.